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The “Islamic State” Without a State

Adam Hoffman

On October 17, 2018, in an interview with the *Associated Press*, U.S. President Donald Trump declared the defeat of the Islamic State (IS). Trump said that “ISIS is defeated in all of the areas that we fought[it].”¹ Indeed, it has been one year since the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated al-Raqqah, the IS’s Syrian de-facto capital, in October 2017. At the time, SDF members described their victory on social media as being a “defeat of the forces of darkness.”² Shortly after the fall of Raqqah, the then Iraqi President, Haider al-‘Abadi, made a similar declaration after the Iraqi Army regained control of the Iraq-Syria border. Nevertheless, even though 2018 led to what seemed like the defeat of the territorial caliphate of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the developments on the ground indicate that rather than suffering a total defeat, the Islamic State changed its strategy and returned to its roots as a guerrilla movement.

The most noticeable change IS experienced was a dramatic contraction in the size of the territory it controls. If in September 2014, it controlled a third of Iraq and ruled over a population of approximately ten million people (in an area the size of the United Kingdom),³ by the end of 2017, the organization had lost 98 percent of that territory.⁴ The only remaining enclave it still controls, as of November 2018, is the Middle Euphrates River Valley in northeastern Syria, and the U.S. military and the SDF have been operating there in recent months to uproot the organization.

Its dramatic loss of territory has eroded the IS’s legitimacy, which was based on territorial control and continuous territorial expansion, which distinguished it from al-Qa‘ida and other jihadist organizations. This drive to continuously expand its territorial control, as promised in the group’s rallying cry, *bakiyyah wa tatamadad*

(literally: remaining and expanding), was an important part of the organization's founding principles. It allowed the Islamic State to offer services to the civilian population that was under its control, and to implement its radical interpretation of Islamic law (*shari'a*). Thus, losing control over large parts of Iraq and Syria was a serious blow to the organization, which marketed itself as the realization of "the promise of Allah" (as it titled its caliphate declaration in June 2014) and a long held ideal in Islamic history, the caliphate-state, with its intention to continuously expand across the Middle East.

In addition to losing territory, the group also lost its large flow of foreign fighters. After it declared its caliphate in 2014, between 27,000 and 31,000 people (men and women) from 86 countries flocked to the IS stronghold and joined its ranks.⁵ These volunteers came in response to the call to Muslims worldwide to perform *hijrah* and immigrate to the Islamic State. As a result of this mobilization between 2014 and 2016, many countries were faced with challenge of trying to prevent people from traveling to Iraq and Syria to join the group. However, since the collapse of the caliphate, thousands of foreign fighters have attempted to return to their countries of origin, dramatically affecting the IS's operations.

The return of the foreign fighters to their homelands (in Europe, Canada, the U.S., and elsewhere) raised numerous problems and questions for these countries: Is the best way to deal with these returning fighters to imprison them? Or is it to rehabilitate, reeducate, and reintegrate them into society? Does the return of these foreign fighters intensify or reduce the threat of terrorism? Additionally, is it possible for such individuals to be tried and convicted for their actions, without solid evidence of what they were doing during the time they spent in Syria and Iraq? The SDF have detained 900 fighters from 44 countries, declaring that they would not prosecute IS fighters in *Rojava* (West Kurdistan) and argued for repatriation of foreign fighters so that they could be tried in their home countries.⁶ However, to date, many governments have not been willing to accept this request.

Despite the dramatic shrinkage in the size of its territory and the number of foreign fighters which have attempted to join the group in the past year, the IS still describes itself in its publications as the "Islamic State" and characterizes its fighters as "soldiers of the caliphate." In addition, even though its state-like project has been almost entirely destroyed, according to a UN report released in August 2018, the group still has 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.⁷

Back to the Roots: From Controlling Cities to Guerrilla Warfare

The IS's losses required it to adjust its strategy, transitioning from governing cities to conducting guerrilla warfare in areas that it previously controlled. As a result, during the past year, there have been many reports of IS attacks on Iraqi villages and on Iraqi security forces, including in Diyala, Saladin, and in Kirkuk.⁸ These attacks have increased recently: according to data from the Kurdistan Regional Security Council (KRSC) intelligence service in Northern Iraq, more than 70 attacks were launched in August, more than 80 in September, and almost 90 in October. As a result, a senior official in the KRSC said that "former ISIS strongholds have re-emerged as strongholds" once again.⁹

This increase in attacks reflects a conscious decision IS made to return to the mode of operation it used from 2007 through 2010, when it did not control significant territory in Iraq but carried out guerrilla attacks against Iraqi and US forces in the country. The long-time IS spokesperson, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, who was killed in August 2016, indicated this change in direction during his last speech in May 2016: "do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqah or even take all the cities and we were to return to our initial condition? Certainly not!"¹⁰ The same "initial condition" refers to the era of the "Islamic State in Iraq" (ISI), which preceded the IS, and which was almost completely destroyed by the American forces and Sunni tribes that cooperated with them in 2006-2007, known as the *Sahwa* ("Awakening"). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS's leader, reiterated these ideas in his most recent speech, which was released in August 2018. After a lengthy period of silence during which some believed he had been killed, Baghdadi stated that "the scale of victory or defeat with the mujahidin, the people of faith and piety, is not tied to a city or a village that was taken." Along with the call to execute attacks against Western targets, which is a recurring theme of IS statements in recent years, Baghdadi claimed that "history repeats itself."¹¹

IS publications in the last few months indicate a return to a strategy of attacking Shi'i militias and Sunni fighters that operate against it. The video depicted events in "Wilayat Dijlah," in an area south of the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, in October 2018, began with statements by Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, the first leader of the "Islamic State in Iraq," and emphasized raids, arrests, and assassinations of village elders (*mukhtars*) and members of the Shi'i militias, the PMF (Popular Mobilization Forces - al-Hashd al-Sh'abi), whom the IS calls "apostates" (*murtadun*).¹² The IS has

killed more than three *mukhtars* per week during the past six months.¹³ This insurgency is part of the IS's plan to suppress any resistance to the organization and may indicate the organization's intention is to retake control of these areas in the future. This guerrilla war is meant to expose the weakness of the Iraqi state and its lack of effective control over many areas of the country, while also undermining the sense of security of the citizens (Sunnis and Shi'is alike) in areas where the organization was ostensibly defeated. In the Hawija region, an area liberated by the Iraqi military in October 2017, civilians claim that ““Even during daytime, we are in danger of being kidnapped, killed, slaughtered, robbed. ISIS can do anything they want. We are under their control.”¹⁴

The leadership of al-Baghdadi may be a key factor in preserving the internal cohesion and organizational continuity of the IS. Baghdadi's leadership is considered stable and accepted by IS members since he was chosen by the Islamic State in Iraq's Shura Council (top decision-making body) in 2010. According to scholars Haroro J. Ingram and Craig A. Whiteside, in the eyes of IS supporters, his authority has endured despite the collapse of the caliphate,¹⁵ in striking contrast to the state of al-Qa'ida since Usama bin Laden's death. Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is perceived as lacking charisma and unable to lead the organization and maintain its unity in the face of regional changes and external challenges.

The Islamic State has survived despite the massive international and regional effort to defeat it. Even in its present form, it is still active as a guerrilla movement in Iraq and continues to fight in its remaining territories in Syria, particularly in the Deir al-Zour region. This evolution from a proto-state to a guerrilla organization is largely a return to the group's earlier incarnation in Iraq, prior to the 2014 declaration of the caliphate. The coming years will determine whether it can survive as an insurgency, and perhaps even replicate its past successes, or whether it will cease to be a relevant organization in the landscape of global jihad.

Adam Hoffman is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; a lecturer at the Rothberg International School, and an analyst in the Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), Tel Aviv University.

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¹⁴ Simona Foltyn, "The Underground Caliphate," [The Intercept](#), September 16, 2018.

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